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FLUSH WITH TIMBER MONEY, CONGRESSMAN WORKS TO LOOSEN FOREST PROTECTIONS

Representative Bruce Westerman has received more than \$100,000 in timber industry campaign donations. Now, he is pushing a bill that relaxes environmental regulations on the same industry.

JIMMY TOBIAS · JUL 11, 2017

If you're puzzled by a prestigious leader's actions, if you're struggling to comprehend a high official's priorities, it always helps to know who's paying the political bills. Understanding where campaign cash comes from offers instant clarity.

Consider Bruce Westerman, a trained forester and engineer who represents Arkansas' fourth district in the House of Representatives. Last month, Westerman introduced his Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017, a lengthy piece of legislation that pertains to forest management, wildfire suppression and timber production on public lands across the nation. Backed by many of his Republican colleagues as well as a handful of Democrats, the House Committee on Natural Resources passed the bill on June 27, advancing it to the full chamber for consideration.

In a recent op-ed, Westerman described the bill as an attempt "to make our federal forests healthy again through sound science and management." It aims to fix federal forests that have "become overgrown, disease and bug infested, fire-prone thickets partially due to no active forestry management...." The bill will "better allow the [United States] Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to utilize tools to immediately reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire, insect and disease infestation and damage to state, municipal and personal property."

The timber industry, for its part, sees the bill in a similar light.

"It is badly needed and overdue and it addresses the critical problems facing the Forest Service," says Bill Imbergamo, the executive director of the Federal Forest Resource Coalition, a trade group that represents forest products companies that do business on federal land. "We think it will allow better forest management and increase timber outputs."

Conservationists, however, feel very differently. While Westerman's legislation *does* contain a number of public-interest provisions—most notably a section that would allow federal land agencies to access funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency in order to cover burgeoning wildland firefighting costs—environmental groups say it would also eviscerate conservation protections and citizen oversight on broad swaths of public forestland across the country.

THE ACT MAKES IT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT FOR PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEYS AND CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS TO AFFORD TO PURSUE A CASE.

The Resilient Federal Forests Act, for instance, would effectively exempt a diverse array of timber harvesting projects up to 10,000 acres in size from the stringent environmental review and public comment procedures established by the National Environmental Policy Act. It would also punch holes in the Endangered Species Act consultation process, limiting such consultations to an arbitrary 90 days and allowing federal land agencies to forgo them outright in some cases.

What's more, the bill restricts the ability of citizens to access the courts and meaningfully seek judicial oversight. Among other things, the Resilient Federal Forests Act forbids the federal government from paying out reasonable attorney fees to lawyers who successfully bring suit against forest management activities carried out pursuant to the Act, thus making it much more difficult for public interest attorneys and civil society groups to afford to pursue a case.

The legislation, according to Mike Anderson, a senior policy analyst at the Wilderness Society, is a timber industry "wish list."

"It is reckless," he says. "The bill short circuits environmental review and scientific analysis and takes the public out of public land management to an extreme degree."

Timber interests, in other words, stand to gain a great deal from Westerman's legislation, with its regulatory loopholes and limitations on public participation. Westerman and his political operation, meanwhile, have benefited mightily from the timber industry too.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the forest products industry is the congressman's second highest campaign contributor, funneling more than \$142,000 into his campaign coffers since he was first elected in 2014. Individuals and political action committees associated with heavyweight timber harvesters and wood manufacturers, including Weyerhaeuser Co, Potlatch Corp, Deltic Timber, and Koch Industries, are all on the list of his 20 most generous benefactors. And, during the 2016 election, Westerman received more timber industry campaign money than any other Republican politician serving on Capitol Hill, save Paul Ryan.

Westerman, whose office did not respond to multiple requests for comment, is one of Big Timber's best-funded buddies in Washington. From his well-situated seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, he is showing what friendship is for.